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Hero in Man

George William Russell



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THE
HERO IN MAN

BY
A. E.

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THE HERO IN MAN



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PRELUDE.

λαμπαδια ἔχοντες διαδωσουσιν ἄλληλοις.—PLATO.



WE who live in the great cities could not altogether avoid, even if we would, a certain association with the interests of our time. Wherever we go the minds of men are feverishly debating some new political measure or some new scheme for the reconstruction of society. Now, as in olden times, the rumours of an impending war will engulf the subtler interests of men, and unless we are willing to forego all intercourse we find ourselves involved in a hundred sympathies. A friendly group will gather one evening and open their thoughts concerning the experiences of the soul; they will often declare that only these matters are of profound interest, and yet on

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the morrow the most of them regard the enthusiasms of the mind as far away, unpractical, not of immediate account. But even at noon the stars are above us and because a man in material difficulties cannot evoke the highest experiences that he has known they have not become less real. They pertain to his immortal nature and if in the circumstance of life he loses memory of them it is because he is likewise mortal. In the measure that we develop our interior selves philosophy becomes the most permanent of our interests and it may well be that the whole aim of Man is to acquire an unbroken and ever-broadening realisation of the Supreme Spirit so that in a far-off day he may become the master of all imaginable conditions. He, therefore, who brings us back to our central selves and shows us that however far we may wander it is these high thoughts which are truly the most real—he is of all men our greatest benefactor.

Now those who thus care for the spiritual aspect of life are of two kinds,—the intellectual and the imaginative. There are men of keen intellect who comprehend some philosophic system, who will defend it with elaborate reasonings and proclaim themselves its adherents, but the earth at their feet, the stars in the firmament, man himself and their

own souls have undergone no transfiguration. Their philosophies are lifeless, for imagination is to the intellect what breath is to the body. Thoughts that never glow with imagination, that are never applied to all that the sense perceives or the mind remembers—thoughts that remain quite abstract, are as empty husks of no value.

But there are those who have studied by the light of imagination and these know well that the inner life of thought, of experiment, and of wonder, though it may often be overclouded, is the only life which can henceforth give them content. They know that it was not when they were most immersed in the affairs of the day but rather when the whole world appeared for a little while to be pulsating with an almost uncontainable splendour, that they were most alive. For the best mood we have ever known, though it be lost for long, is yet the clearest revelation of our true selves, and it is then that we learn most nearly what marvels life may hold.

If we read with imagination the Dialogues of Plato we dwell for a while among those ardent Greeks for whom the universe was changed by the words of the poet-philosopher. So too when we read the letter that was written by Plotinus to Flaccus, perhaps

the serenest height the human soul has ever attained, we become ourselves the recipients. In either case we feel that we have lived in the presence of a princely soul. It is an inspiration to realise that we are of the one race with these and may look out on the same beauty of earth and heaven.

Yet the magic of the mind is not enduring and to dream overlong of a bygone beauty is to make sorrowful the present. What imaginative reader of Plato but has desired with a fruitless ardour that he might in truth have been numbered with those who walked on the daisied lawns of the Academy, might in truth have heard the voice of the hardly human initiate, have seen him face to face, have responded to the influence of his presence? who but would willingly translate his life to another century if he could but hear Plotinus endeavouring to describe in human language an ecstasy which makes of man a god?

I know that one may easily injure whatever one most loves by speaking of it in superlative praise to those who as yet remain aloof with interest unaroused, but for me it is hard to refrain from an expression of that admiration, and I would fain say also that affection, which burns up within me when I

read the writings of A. E. For they cause me to think of him as one of those rare spirits who bring to men the realisation of their own divinity, who make the spiritual life seem adventurous, attractive, and vivid, so that we go forth into the world with a new interest and a new joy at heart. That, as I have sought to show in the opening of this note, is the greatest of all things that anyone can do. The life of such a man makes beautiful the generation with which it coincides. If we penetrate the human words and inhabit, so far as we are able, the mood which was passing in the soul as it shaped them, we may learn from the reveries that are here reprinted how to the mystic of this material age the world remains equally wonderful and human life equally holy as either seemed in the far-off days when beauty was more greatly desired. For of deeper value at all times than any particular thought is the pervading mood. Perhaps the reader will remember here the following passage by Robert Louis Stevenson :—“ Such are the best teachers ; a dogma learned is only a new error—the old one was perhaps as good ; but a spirit communicated is a perpetual possession. These best teachers climb beyond teaching to the plane of art ; it is themselves, and what is

best in themselves, that they communicate." To read the essays that follow, or the three volumes of poetry that A. E. has published, is to recognise one who has endeavoured always to communicate the "best in himself," and the mood which they induce is a mood from which we may see the world once more in its primal beauty, may recover a sense of the long-forgotten and inextinguishable grandeur of the soul.

CLIFFORD BAX.

April, 1909.

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THE HERO IN MAN.

I.



HERE sometimes comes on us a mood of strange reverence for people and things which in less contemplative hours we hold to be unworthy; and in such moments we may set side by side the head of Christ and the head of an outcast, and there is an equal radiance around each, which makes of the darker face a shadow and is itself a shadow around the head of light. We feel a fundamental unity of purpose in their presence here, and would as willingly pay homage to the one who has fallen as to him who has become a master of life. I know that immemorial order decrees that the

laurel and the crown be given only to the victor, but in these moments I speak of a profound intuition changes the decree and sets the aureole on both alike.

We feel such deep pity for the fallen that there must needs be a justice in it, for these diviner feelings are wise in themselves and do not vaguely arise. They are lights from the Father. A justice lies in uttermost pity and forgiveness, even when we seem to ourselves to be most deeply wronged; or why is it that the awakening of resentment or hate brings such swift contrition? We are ever self-condemned; and the dark thought which went forth in us brooding revenge, when suddenly smitten by the light, withdraws and hides within itself in awful penitence. In asking myself why it is that the meanest are safe from our condemnation when we sit on the true seat of judgment in the heart, it seemed to me that their shield was the sense we have of a nobility hidden in them under the cover of ignoble things; that their present darkness was the result of some too weighty heroic labour undertaken long ago by the human spirit; that it was the consecration of past purpose which played with such a tender light about their ruined lives, and it was more pathetic because this nobleness was all un-

known to the fallen and the heroic cause of so much pain was forgotten in life's prison-house.

While feeling the service to us of the great ethical ideals which have been formulated by men, I think that the idea of justice intellectually conceived tends to beget a certain hardness of the heart. It is true that men have done wrong—hence their pain: but back of all this there is something infinitely soothing, a light which does not wound, which says no harsh thing, even although the darkest of spirits turns to it in its agony, for the darkest of human spirits has still around him this first glory which shines from a deeper being within, whose history may be told as the legend of the Hero in Man.

Among the many immortals with whom ancient myth peopled the spiritual sphere of humanity are some figures which draw to themselves a more profound tenderness than the rest. Not Aphrodite rising in beauty from the faery foam of the first seas, not Apollo with sweetest singing, laughter, and youth, not the wielder of the lightning, could exact the reverence accorded to the lonely Titan chained on the mountain, or to that bowed figure heavy with the burden of the sins of the world; for the brighter divinities

had no part in the labour of man, no such intimate relation with the wherefore of his own existence so full of struggle. The more radiant figures are prophecies to him of his destiny, but the Titan and the Christ are a revelation of his more immediate state; their giant sorrows companion his own, and in contemplating them he awakens what is noblest in his own nature; or, in other words, in understanding their divine heroism he understands himself. For this in truth it seems to me to mean: all knowledge is a revelation of the self to the self, and our deepest comprehension of the seemingly apart divine is also our furthest inroad to self-knowledge; Prometheus, Christ, are in every heart; the story of one is the story of all; the Titan and the Crucified are humanity.

If, then, we consider them as representing the human spirit and disentangle from the myths their meaning, we shall find that whatever reverence is due to that heroic love which descended from heaven for the redeeming of a lower nature, must be paid to every human being. Christ is incarnate in all humanity. Prometheus is bound for ever within us. They are the same. They are a host, and the divine incarnation was not spoken of one, but of all those who descending into

the lower world tried to change it into the divine image and to wrest out of chaos a kingdom for the empire of light. The angels saw below them in chaos a senseless rout blind with elemental passion for ever warring with discordant cries which broke in upon the world of divine beauty; and that the pain might depart, they grew rebellious in the Master's peace, and descending to earth the angelic lights were crucified in men; leaving so radiant worlds, such a light of beauty, for earth's grey twilight filled with tears, that through this elemental life might breathe the starry music brought from Him. If the "Foreseer" be a true name for the Titan, it follows that in the host which he represents was a light which well foreknew all the dark paths of its journey; foreseeing the bitter struggle with a hostile nature, but foreseeing perhaps a gain, a distant glory o'er the hills of sorrow, and that chaos, divine and transformed, with only gentle breathing, lit up by the Christ-soul of the universe. There is a transforming power in the thought itself: we can no longer condemn the fallen, they who laid aside their thrones of ancient power, their spirit ecstasy and beauty, on such a mission. Perhaps those who sank lowest did so to raise a greater burden, and of these most fallen it

may in the hour of their resurrection be said, "The last shall be first."

So, placing side by side the head of the outcast with the head of Christ, it has this equal beauty—with as bright a glory it sped from the Father in ages past on its redeeming labour. Of his present darkness what shall we say? "He is altogether dead in sin?" Nay, rather with tenderness forbear, and think that the foreseeing spirit has taken its own dread path to mastery; that that which foresaw the sorrow foresaw also beyond it a greater joy and a mightier existence, when it would rise again in a new robe, woven out of the treasure hidden in the deep of its submergence, and shine at last like the stars of the morning triumphant among the Sons of God.

II.

OUR deepest life is when we are alone. We think most truly, love best, when isolated from the outer world in that mystic abyss we call soul. Nothing external can equal the fulness of these moments. We may sit in the blue twilight with a friend, or bend together by the hearth, half whispering, or in a silence populous with loving thoughts mutually understood; then we may feel happy

and at peace, but it is only because we are lulled by a semblance to deeper intimacies. When we think of a friend, and the loved one draws nigh, we sometimes feel half-pained, for we touched something in our solitude which the living presence shut out; we seem more apart, and would fain wave them away and cry, "Call me not forth from this; I am no more a spirit if I leave my throne." But these moods, though lit up by intuitions of the true, are too partial, they belong too much to the twilight of the heart, they have too dreamy a temper to serve us well in life. We should wish rather for our thoughts a directness such as belongs to the messengers of the gods, swift, beautiful, flashing presences bent on purposes well understood.

What we need is that this interior tenderness shall be elevated into seership, that what in most is only yearning or blind love shall see clearly its way and hope. To this end we have to observe more intently the nature of the interior life. We find, indeed, that it is not a solitude at all, but dense with multitudinous being: instead of being alone we are in the thronged highways of existence. For our guidance when entering here many words of warning have been uttered, laws have been outlined, and beings full of wonder, terror, and

beauty described. Yet there is a spirit in us deeper than our intellectual being which I think of as the Hero in man, who feels the nobility of its place in the midst of all this, and who would fain equal the greatness of perception with deeds as great. The weariness and sense of futility which often falls upon the mystic after much thought is due to this, that he has not recognised that he must be worker as well as seer, that here he has duties demanding a more sustained endurance just as the inner life is so much vaster and more intense than the life he has left behind.

Now the duties which can be taken up by the soul are exactly those which it feels most inadequate to perform when acting as an embodied being. What shall be done to quiet the heart-cry of the world: how answer the dumb appeal for help we so often divine below eyes that laugh? It is the saddest of all sorrows to think that pity with no hands to heal, that love without a voice to speak, should helplessly heap their pain upon pain while earth shall endure. But there is a truth about sorrow which I think may make it seem not so hopeless. There are fewer barriers than we think: there is, in truth, an inner alliance between the soul who would fain give and the soul who is in need. Nature has well

provided that not one golden ray of all our thoughts is sped ineffective through the dark ; not one drop of the magical elixirs love distils is wasted. Let us consider how this may be. There is a habit we nearly all have indulged in. We weave little stories in our minds, expending love and pity upon the imaginary beings we have created, and I have been led to think that many of these are not imaginary, that somewhere in the world beings are living just in that way, and we merely reform and live over again in our life the story of another life. Sometimes these faraway intimates assume so vivid a shape, they come so near with their appeal for sympathy that the pictures are unforgettable ; and the more I ponder over them the more it seems to me that they often convey the actual need of some soul whose cry for comfort has gone out into the vast, perhaps to meet with an answer, perhaps to hear only silence. I will supply an instance. I see a child, a curious, delicate little thing, seated on the doorstep of a house. It is an alley in some great city, and there is a gloom of evening and vapour over the sky. I see the child is bending over the path ; he is picking cinders and arranging them, and as I ponder, I become aware that he is laying down in gritty lines the walls of a house, the

mansion of his dream. Here spread along the pavement are large rooms, these for his friends, and a tiny room in the centre, that is his own. So his thought plays. Just then I catch a glimpse of the corduroy trousers of a passing workman, and a heavy boot crushes through the cinders. I feel the pain in the child's heart as he shrinks back, his little love-lit house of dreams all rudely shattered. Ah, poor child, building the City Beautiful out of a few cinders, yet nigher, truer in intent than many a stately, gold-rich palace reared by princes, thou wert not forgotten by that mighty spirit who lives through the falling of empires, whose home has been in many a ruined heart. Surely it was to bring comfort to hearts like thine that that most noble of all meditations was ordained by the Buddha. *"He lets his mind pervade one quarter of the world with thoughts of Love, and so the second, and so the third, and so the fourth. And thus the whole wide world, above, below, around, and everywhere, does he continue to pervade with heart of Love far-reaching, grown great and beyond measure."*

That love, though the very fairy breath of life, should by itself and so imparted have a sustaining power some may question, not those who have felt the sunlight fall from

distant friends who think of them ; but, to make clearer how it seems to me to act, I say that love, Eros, is a being. It is more than a power of the soul, though it is that also ; it has a universal life of its own, and just as the dark heaving waters do not know what jewel lights they reflect with blinding radiance, so the soul, partially absorbing and feeling the ray of Eros within it, does not know that often a part of its nature nearer to the sun of love shines with a brilliant light to other eyes than its own. Many people move unconscious of their own charm, unknowing of the beauty and power they seem to others to impart. It is some past attainment of the soul, a jewel won in some old battle which it may have forgotten, but none the less this gleams on its tiara and the star-flame inspires others to hope and victory.

If it is true here that many exert a spiritual influence they are unconscious of, it is still truer of the spheres within. Once the soul has attained to any possession like love, or persistent will, or faith, or a power of thought, it comes into spiritual contact with others who are struggling for these very powers. The attainment of any of these means that the soul is able to absorb and radiate some of the diviner elements of being. The soul may

or may not be aware of the position it is placed in or its new duties, but yet that Living Light, having found a way into the being of any one person, does not rest there, but sends its rays and extends its influence on and on to illumine the darkness of another nature. So it comes that there are ties which bind us to people other than those whom we meet in our everyday life. I think they are most real ties, most important to understand, for if we let our lamp go out some far away who had reached out in the dark and felt a steady will, a persistent hope, a compassionate love, may reach out once again in an hour of need, and finding no support may give way and fold the hands in despair. Often we allow gloom to overcome us and so hinder the bright rays in their passage; but would we do it so often if we thought that perhaps a sadness which besets us, we do not know why, was caused by someone drawing nigh to us for comfort, whom our lethargy might make feel still more his helplessness, while our courage, our faith, might cause "our light to shine in some other heart which as yet has no light of its own"?

III.

THE night was wet: and, as I was moving down the streets, my mind was also journeying

on a way of its own, and the things which were bodily present before me were no less with me in my unseen travelling. Every now and then a transfer would take place, and some of the moving shadows in the street would begin walking about in the clear interior light. The children of the city, crouched in the doorways, or racing through the hurrying multitude and flashing lights, began their elfin play again in my heart ; and that was because I had heard these tiny outcasts shouting with glee. I wondered if the glitter and shadow of such sordid things were thronged with magnificence and mystery for those who were unaware of a greater light and deeper shade which made up the romance and fascination of my own life. In imagination I narrowed myself to their ignorance, littleness and youth, and seemed for a moment to flit amid great uncomprehended beings and a dim wonderful city of palaces.

Then another transfer took place and I was pondering anew, for a face I had seen flickering through the warm wet mist haunted me ; it entered into the realm of the interpreter, and I was made aware by the pale cheeks, and by the close-shut lips of pain, and by some inward knowledge, that there the Tree of Life was beginning to grow, and I

wondered why it is that it always springs up through a heart in ashes: I wondered also if that which springs up, which in itself is an immortal joy, has knowledge that its shoots are piercing through such anguish; or again, if it was the piercing of the shoots which caused the pain, and if every throb of the beautiful flame darting upward to blossom meant the perishing of some more earthly growth which had kept the heart in shadow.

Seeing too how many thoughts spring up from such a simple thing, I questioned whether that which started the impulse had any share in the outcome, and if these musings of mine in any way affected their subject. I then began thinking about those secret ties on which I have speculated before, and in the darkness my heart grew suddenly warm and glowing, for I had chanced upon one of those shining imaginations which are the wealth of those who travel upon the hidden ways. In describing that which comes to us all at once, there is a difficulty in choosing between what is first and what is last to say: but, interpreting as best I can, I seemed to behold the onward movement of a Light, one among many Lights, all living, throbbing, now dim with perturbations, and now again clear, and all subtly woven together, outwardly in some

more shadowy shining, and inwardly in a greater fire, which, though it was invisible, I knew to be the Lamp of the World. This Light which I beheld I felt to be a human soul, and these perturbations which dimmed it were its struggles and passionate longings for something, and that was for a more brilliant shining of the light within itself. It was in love with its own beauty, enraptured by its own lucidity; and I saw that as these things were more beloved they grew paler, for this light is the love which the Mighty Mother has in her heart for her children, and she means that it shall go through each one unto all, and whoever restrains it in himself is himself shut out; not that the great heart has ceased in its love for that soul, but that the soul has shut itself off from influx, for every imagination of man is the opening or the closing of a door to the divine world: now he is solitary, cut off, and, seemingly to himself, on the desert and distant verge of things: and then his thought throws open the swift portals; he hears the chant of the seraphs in his heart, and he is made luminous by the lighting of a sudden aureole. This soul which I watched seemed to have learned at last the secret love: for, in the anguish begotten by its loss, it followed the departing glory in

penitence to the inmost shrine where it ceased altogether ; and because it seemed utterly lost and hopeless of attainment and capriciously denied to the seeker, a profound pity arose in the soul for those who, like it were seeking, but still in hope, for they had not come to the vain end of their endeavours. I understood that such pity is the last of the precious essences which make up the elixir of immortality, and when it is poured into the cup it is ready for drinking. And so it was with this soul which grew brilliant with the passage of the eternal light through its new purity of self-oblivion, and joyful in the comprehension of the mystery of the secret love, which, though it has been declared many times by the greatest of teachers among men, is yet never known truly unless the Mighty Mother has herself breathed it in the heart.

And now that the soul had divined this secret, the shadowy shining which was woven in bonds of union between it and its fellow-lights grew clearer ; and a multitude of these strands were, so it seemed, strengthened and placed in its keeping : along these it was to send the message of the wisdom and the love which were the secret sweetness of its own being. Then a spiritual tragedy began, infinitely more pathetic than the old desolation,

because it was brought about by the very nobility of the spirit. This soul, shedding its love like rays of glory, seemed itself the centre of a ring of wounding spears: it sent forth love and the arrowy response came hate-impelled: it whispered peace and was answered by the clash of rebellion: and to all this for defence it could only bare more openly its heart that a profounder love from the Mother Nature might pass through upon the rest. I knew this was what a teacher, who wrote long ago, meant when he said: "Put on the whole armour of God," which is love and endurance, for the truly divine children of the Flame are not armed otherwise: and of those protests, sent up in ignorance or rebellion against the whisper of the wisdom, I saw that some melted in the fierce and tender heat of the heart, and there came in their stead a golden response which made closer the ties, and drew these souls upward to an understanding and to share in the overshadowing nature. And this is part of the plan of the Great Alchemist, whereby the red ruby of the heart is transmuted into the tenderer light of the opal; for the beholding of love made bare acts like the flame of the furnace: and the dissolving passions, through an anguish of remorse, the lightnings of pain, and through an adoring

pity, are changed into the image they contemplate, and melt in the ecstasy of self-forgetful love, the spirit which lit the thorn-crowned brows, which perceived only in its last agony the retribution due to its tormentors, and cried out, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

Now although the love of the few may alleviate the hurt due to the ignorance of the mass, it is not in the power of anyone to withstand for ever this warfare; for by the perpetual wounding of the inner nature it is so wearied that the spirit must withdraw from a tabernacle grown too frail to support the increase of light within and the jarring of the demoniac nature without; and at length comes the call which means, for a while, release, and a deep rest in regions beyond the paradise of lesser souls. So, withdrawn into the Divine Darkness, vanished the Light of my dream. And now it seemed as if this wonderful web of souls intertwining as one being must come to naught; and all those who through the gloom had nourished a longing for the light would stretch out hands in vain for guidance: but that I did not understand the love of the Mother, and that although few, there is no decaying of her heroic brood; for, as the seer of old caught at the mantle of him who went

up in the fiery chariot, so another took up the burden and gathered the shining strands together: and to this sequence of spiritual guides there is no ending.

Here I may say that the love of the Mother, which, acting through the burnished will of the hero, is wrought to highest uses, is in reality everywhere, and pervades with profoundest tenderness the homeliest circumstance of daily life; and there is not lacking, even among the humblest, an understanding of the spiritual tragedy which follows upon every effort of the divine nature bowing itself down in pity to our shadowy sphere; an understanding in which the nature of the love is gauged through the extent of the sacrifice and the pain which is overcome. I recall the instance of an old Irish peasant, who, as he lay in hospital wakeful from a grinding pain in his leg, forgot himself in making drawings, rude yet reverently done, of incidents in the life of the Galilean teacher. One of these which he showed me was a crucifixion, where, amidst much grotesque symbolism, were some tracings which indicated a purely beautiful intuition; the heart of this crucified figure, no less than the brow, was wreathed about with thorns and radiant with light: "For that," said he, "was where he really suffered."

When I think of this old man, bringing forgetfulness of his own bodily pain through contemplation of the spiritual suffering of his Master, my memory of him shines with something of the transcendent light he himself perceived; for I feel that some suffering of his own, nobly undergone, had given him understanding, and he had laid his heart in love against the Heart of Many Sorrows, seeing it wounded by unnumbered spears yet burning with undying love.

Though much may be learned by observance of the superficial life and actions of a spiritual teacher, it is only in the deeper life of meditation and imagination that it can be truly realised; for the soul is a midnight blossom which opens its leaves in dream, and its perfect bloom is unfolded only where another sun shines in another heaven: there it feels what celestial dews descend on it, and what influences draw it up to its divine archetype: here in the shadow of earth root intercoils with root and the finer distinctions of the blossom are not perceived. If we knew also who they really are, who sometimes in silence, and sometimes with the eyes of the world at gaze, take upon them the mantle of teacher, an unutterable awe would prevail for underneath a bodily presence not in any

sense beautiful may burn the glory of some ancient divinity, some hero who has laid aside his sceptre in the enchanted land to rescue old-time comrades fallen into oblivion: or again, if we had the insight of the simple old peasant into the nature of this enduring love, out of the exquisite and poignant emotions kindled would arise the flame of a passionate love which would endure long æons of anguish that it might shield, though but for a little, the kingly hearts who may not shield themselves.

But I too, who write, have launched the rebellious spear, or in lethargy have oftentimes gone down the great drift numbering myself among those who not being with must needs be against: therefore I make no appeal; they only may call who stand upon the lofty mountains; but I reveal the thought which arose like a star in my soul with such bright and pathetic meaning, leaving it to you who read to approve and apply it.

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This series of booklets will be issued in connection with "Orpheus," a Quarterly Magazine of Mystical Art, which may be had for four shillings and sixpence a year. It is hoped that some of the succeeding numbers may also be composed of reprints from the early writings of A. E. The following is a list of the books that A. E. has at present published :

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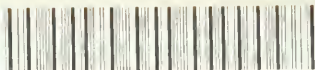
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